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UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

NEWS

DATE: March 31, 1987

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O-202/659-6700
H-703/979-3293

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONFERENCE BOARD CALLS FOR PEACE IN EAST TIMOR

WASHINGTON--An armed conflict that has resulted in the deaths of 100,000 East Timorese since 1975 was cited by the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference in calling for action to bring "a just and authentic peace" to East Timor.

The 50-member body, which conducts business of the U.S. Catholic bishops between their general meetings, related the conflict with "the brutal invasion and takeover" of East Timor by Indonesia after the collapse of the Portuguese colonial administration.

In a statement approved (March 25) during its regular spring meeting, the USCC Board said the East Timor situation has begun to receive "the attention it deserves" but it has not been "translated into the action needed to right the wrongs which continue to this day."

Calling attention to "intimidation" of the Catholic Church in East Timor, the statement mentioned forced birth control measures as "especially disturbing" and said that "given the great loss of life that has already taken place among a largely

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Catholic people, this Indonesian policy takes on the character of genocide."

The USCC Board called on the United States, which it said "has contributed much economic and military assistance to Indonesia," to "make appropriate representations" toward influencing Indonesian government efforts to "bring a just and authentic peace to the territory."

Test of the statement:

The brutal invasion and takeover of East Timor by Indonesia, which started in 1975 after the collapse of the Portuguese colonial administration, has in recent years begun to receive the attention it deserves, but this attention has not yet been translated into the action needed to right the wrongs which continue to this day.

In July 1984 Pope John Paul II expressed grave concern over the East Timor situation while receiving the credentials of the new Indonesian ambassador to the Holy See. Bishops' Conferences and Catholic Justice and Peace Commissions in Western Europe -- in Portugal, West Germany, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands -- as well as in Canada and Japan, have made statements or otherwise communicated support and sympathy for the East Timorese and concern over the armed conflict that persists in the territory. This conflict has seen an estimated 100,000 East Timorese (of a population of less than 700,000 before the Indonesian invasion) perish as a result of the Indonesian occupation.

There is a pressing need to guarantee freedom of expression for, and an end to intimidation of, the Roman Catholic Church in East Timor, which has the heavy responsibility of attending to the spiritual needs of a people that has suffered grievous losses since 1975, and has seen its tasks multiplied during this period. A serious effort to bring a just and authentic peace to East Timor should be made.

Forced Birth control measures introduced by Indonesia in East Timor are especially disturbing, and not only because of the Church's abhorrence of unnatural birth control. Given the great loss of life that has already taken place among a largely Catholic people, this Indonesian policy takes on the character of genocide. Accounts of sterilization of East Timorese men and women without their informed consent and an array of other evidence, impel us to call for an immediate end to this policy: "For in view of the inalienable human right to marry and beget children, the question of how many children should be born belongs to the honest judgement of parents. The question can in no way be committed to the decision of government." (Gaudium et Spes 87)

While East Timor has received increased notice in recent years, it is nonetheless undeniable that this issue exists far from the great political debates of the day, and is all too likely to be overlooked as pressing national and international issues compete for public attention. East Timor's remoteness and isolation from the outside world make its inhabitants all the more vulnerable. It is therefore crucial that the East Timor tragedy be highlighted whenever possible, and that efforts continue to enhance the dignity of life in East Timor and the right of the territory's inhabitants to live in peace and freedom.

The United States, which has had friendly relations with the government of Indonesia since 1965 and which has contributed much economic and military assistance to Indonesia, surely has the right to raise these issues with that government. Appropriate representations by the United States could infuence the government of Indonesia to take measures that would help bring a just and authentic peace to the territory, end any policies of forced birth control in East Timor, and in other ways ameliorate the suffering of these unfortunate people.

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